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Believing, Belonging, and Durkheiming : A Report on the 16th Annual EASR conference

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NOTES AND REVIEWS

BELIEVING, BELONGING, AND DURKHEIMING: A REPORT ON THE 16TH ANNUAL EASR CONFERENCE*

Every year an EASR conference brings together scholars of religion of various and diverse disciplines, topics, approaches, backgrounds, and standpoints. New networks form, new friendships occur, new collaborations begin, and new challenges emerge. The study of religion has always been and, apparently, will always be one of the mainstream directions in social sciences and humanities. Theologians, historians, sociologists, social and cultural anthropologists, ethnologists, folklorists, philosophers, political scientists, psychologists, and even economists with no hesitation identify the same conceptual, methodological, and social problems connected to religions, religiosity, religious believers, adherents, practitioners, and professionals, and also non-religiosity, unbelievers, non-adherents, non-practitioners, and profanes.

In 2018 the medieval picturesque city of Bern hosted a conference at the campus of the most prominent Swiss university – the University of Bern. Bern and its university did not merely provide a venue for the forum, but the city itself contributes to the general topic of the conference with its rich historical, theological, and architectural context. Bern is an important city in the history of Christianity, and the recent political changes and flows of migration put its growing Muslim population on the map of Europe. The ‘nones’ – an umbrella term that includes unbelievers

together with uninstitutionalised and/or unconventionally self-identified practitioners – also play a substantial role in global (non) religious discourse.

The topic of this year, formulated as Multiple Religious Identities – Individuals, Communities, Traditions, questions such concepts as plurality and pluralism, authenticity and orthodoxy, world religions and syncretism (EASR 2018). To achieve these goals the organisers invited six plenary speakers, of whom four presented historical accounts and two contemporary sociological research, discussing the complexity of religious identity in various contexts. The accepted panels were obviously much more diverse in approach, historical and geographical focus, and in conceptual apparatus. Among many, they focused on gender, urban religiosity, politics, conceptual and theoretical challenges, education, youth, migration, conversion and converts, new religiosities, and non-religiosity. The European nature of the conference naturally led to a prevalence of studies of Christianity and Islam, but also to the emergent trends in European religiosity, such as new religious movements, spirituality, and the rise of ‘nones’. Estonian academia, as is already a custom at EASR conferences, was well represented by nine researchers from the University of Tartu, in seven different sessions. They dealt with post-Soviet religiosities, ‘nones’ in

* 16th Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions titled Multiple Religious Identities – Individuals, Communities, Traditions was held on October 17–21, 2018 in Bern, Switzerland.

Europe, religious nationalism, and vernacular religion.

I organised a panel titled *The Unseen Forms of Russian Christianities*, which due to 13 submissions was divided into three parts: Russian Protestantisms, Russian Orthodox minorities, and Russian Orthodox practices. I ended up with six speakers, including myself. However, it gave each of us an excellent opportunity to have up to 30 minutes for the paper and 15 minutes for questions and discussions. The idea behind the panel was to discuss the variety, diversity, and complexity of different forms of Russian Christianity, specifically emphasising its unseen, controversial, and counterintuitive forms.

The morning session on Protestantism started with Laur Vallikivi's paper on "Finno-Ugric Mission in Russia: Protestant Missionaries' Language and Culture Ideologies". Vallikivi discussed the legacy of Protestant missionaries from Estonia and Finland in the ideological context of Finno-Ugrism. My paper, titled "Evangelical Christians-Baptists: The Bible-Believers of Russia", presented a unique community of Russian Baptists to the wider audience of scholars of religion. My main accent pointed out their specific form of biblicism and their glocal (global and local at the same time) nature. In the second part, Torsten Löfstedt presented his study of "The Use of Minority Language Bible Translations among Orthodox Christians in Russia". Löfstedt gave an account of biblical translations among several minority languages in Russia: Tatar, Chuvash, Udmurt, and Komi. Victoria Fomina, in her paper titled "A Subversive Saint: Popular Cult of the Soldier Evgenii Rodionov in Contemporary Russia", discussed the emerging cult of a new Russian martyr. Fomina analysed the patriotic and religious narratives of diverse Russian Orthodox movements, using the case of the veneration of the soldier Evgenii Rodionov, killed in Chechnya in 1996. In the third session, Daria Dubovka presented her research

on Russian Orthodox monasteries in a paper titled "Modern Bodies in Medieval Decorations: Monastic Ascetic Practices in the Contemporary Orthodox Convents". Dubovka addressed the physical and psychological challenges of the monastic life through the theology of asceticism. The concluding paper, by Kirill Markin, "Between Belief and Unbelief: Non-practicing Orthodox Christianity", illustrated the sociological study of religiosity among the Russian population. Markin emphasised the methodological and conceptual challenges of studying the non-practicing, yet formally affiliated with the Orthodox church people in contemporary Russia.

The most problematic issue in terms of organisation was the ideology of chairing. There was no time planned for questions after plenary talks. The floor was open for questions only after the keynotes by Milda Ališauskienė and Jörg Rüpke. A keynote lecture is not a typical conference presentation. However, it bears all the same features and functions, though in an extended format. Every keynote at EASR 2018 was well unfolded, thought-provoking, and engaged a reflection. Yet, there were no ways to discuss it besides forming lines to approach a speaker during a coffee-break or right after a talk when they deserved a break. This practice of neglecting academic discussion and questions eventually spread to some of the panels.

Apart from the organisational issues, I would also identify some conceptual and methodological challenges. The major problem is the concept of religiosity, and even the very concept of religion, and the way it is regarded and studied in a large chunk of the social study of religion nowadays. More than a hundred years have passed since the publication of Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), yet most research, especially quantitative studies, focuses on affiliation as the measurement of religiosity. Most widespread questions asked during surveys concern the

number of church visits throughout a period of time, the importance of prayer and 'religion' in one's life. The concept of religion is not, however, perceived as problematic. As the research of some of the conference participants spectacularly shows (see, for instance, Remmel and Uibu 2015), the emergent adherents of various New Age, New Religious, and 'spiritual' movements have a hard time identifying their belief systems and practices as 'religion'. Moreover, Evangelical Christians tend to perceive 'religion' as almost a pejorative, as something hypocritical that contradicts 'pure faith' (see, for instance, Driscoll 2009). The conceptual approaches to religiosity perhaps go far beyond Durkheim, yet even the most prominent approach, say, by one of the plenary speakers, Grace Davie, also primarily deals with affiliation (Davie 1994).

In this regard, I look forward to the next EASR conference in Tartu, Estonia, in 2019. Titled *Continuations and Disruptions*, it will hopefully focus more on lived religion, change, transformation, and discrepancy, rather than on fixed notions. Estonian scholars of religion constantly deal with the problems connected to the Abrahamic-, or rather Christian-based concept of 'religion'. The conference promises to be a great success.

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